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SUBJECT: MILITARY'S MOMENTUM SLOWS: COLOMBIA CONFLICT
UPDATE FOR APRIL-JUNE 2009

Classified By: Political Counselor Mark Wells Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) demobilizations continued to decline in the second quarter of 2009, as did FARC kills and captures by the Colombian military. National Liberation Army (ELN) demobilizations remained higher. FARC Secretariat member Jorge Briceño (alias "Mono Jojoy") continued to elude Colombian forces, but several mid-level FARC commanders were captured or killed this quarter. The FARC continued to avoid direct engagement with Colombian military forces and favored asymmetrical attacks. The FARC increased attacks in May to commemorate the organization's 45th anniversary.

2. (C) Some analysts pointed to the FARC's inability to carry out a large scale attack as proof of its weakened condition, and of the increased effectiveness of security forces in interdicting and thwarting major attacks. Others argue the FARC are consciously re-adopting a classic Phase I insurgency approach--increasing ambushes in rural areas against small patrols and increasing attacks on lightly-defended police outposts and unprotected infrastructure. The FARC, ELN and emerging criminal groups continued to cooperate in some areas of the country while fighting over control of coca cultivations and drug routes in other areas. End summary.

FARC DEMOBS CONTINUE SLOW-DOWN

3. (C) FARC demobilizations continued to slow during the second quarter, decreasing more than 10% compared to the first quarter of 2009. In the first 6 months of 2009 there were 1,084 FARC demobilizations, representing a nearly 30% decrease compared with the same time frame in 2008. Possible reasons for the continued slow-down in demobilizations include: 1) the FARC are operating in increasingly remote areas where it is logistically more difficult to desert; 2) as military operations have dropped, there is a decrease in available Colombian military personnel to surrender to; 3) the FARC have increased security rings to prevent desertions and FARC members are threatened with death for desertion attempts; 4) the FARC leadership is exercising more control and indoctrination over new FARC recruits and limiting their contact with the outside world; 5) after the record number of desertions in 2008, FARC demobilizations are now cutting to the bone of the organization; and 6) the GOC demobilization program sustained budget cuts during the first half of 2009,

affecting communications and rewards payments, which may have reduced the program's effectiveness.

14. (C) FARC demobilizations remained highest in the Eastern Bloc (although 7% less than last quarter), followed by the Southern and Western Blocs. There was a sharp decrease in demobilizations of FARC members with more than 16 years of experience this quarter--dropping from 27 in the first quarter to only two individuals in the second quarter. The principal reasons cited by demobilized FARC remained pressure from Colombian troops (27%) and the desire for a lifestyle change (25%). Demobilizations due to military pressure have increased markedly over the last three years--accounting for only 4% of demobilizations in 2007, then 19% in 2008 and rising to 26% in 2009. (Comment: One embassy contact told us that sustained military pressure caused many FARC members who joined during the relatively easy times of the Pastrana administration to demobilize in 2008--leaving behind a hard-core cadre that is attempting to recruit new members. End comment.)

ELN DEMOBILIZATIONS STILL HIGHER

15. (C) A total of 280 ELN members demobilized in the first semester of 2009, representing a 72% increase over the same time frame in 2008, when only 163 demobilized. However, there was a slight decrease in ELN demobilizations compared with last quarter (from 155 to 125 individuals). ELN demobilizations were highest in the southwest area of the country due to military pressure and fighting with the FARC. However, the pace of demobilizations in this area appears to be slowing into the third quarter, possibly due to

non-aggression pacts between emerging criminal groups and FARC in the region.

CAPTURES AND KILLS OF FARC DOWN SHARPLY

16. (C) FARC captures by the Colombian military decreased by 18% in the first semester of 2009 compared with the same time frame in 2008, while FARC kills were down by 57% and ELN kills were down by 79% during this time frame. Possible reasons for the slow-down include: 1) commanders are more reluctant to take risks in the wake of the "false positives" human rights scandal, particularly during the leadership gap between outgoing Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos and incoming Minister Gabriel Silva; 2) the FARC are increasingly fragmented, are operating in remote areas of the country and are under instructions not to engage government forces in order to avoid losses; 3) the Colombian military is focused on consolidating priority zones, leaving fewer soldiers to engage the FARC in other areas; and 4) there are fewer FARC to engage as a result of demobilizations and previous operational successes.

17. (S) Local security analyst Roman Ortiz told us that the Colombian military had lost momentum in 2009 and is too cumbersome to adapt to the FARC's change in tactics. The FARC have adopted a defensive posture, are taking advantage of safe havens in border areas, are operating in smaller numbers and are decreasing the size of weapons and equipment caches. Ortiz noted the Colombian military lacks sufficient operational intelligence on FARC structures and operations. He lamented that any hope of decimating the FARC that may have existed after Operation Jaque in July 2008 had now evaporated. (Comment: U.S. embassy agencies that monitor threat conditions suggest the FARC are adopting a classic Phase I insurgency approach--characterized by smaller and dispersed attacks, with an increasing reliance on mine fields, snipers and ambushes. The approach represents a qualitative and significant retreat from the FARC's Pre-Plan Colombia posture.)

HVT HUNT CONTINUES

18. (S) Secretariat members Jorge Briceno (alias "Mono Jojoy") and Guillermo Leon Saenz Vargas (alias "Alfonso Cano") continued to elude the Colombian military this quarter. They

are reportedly constantly on the move in high-altitude, rugged terrain, where the Colombian military's mobility is limited. They are also protected by several layers of security rings, and refrain from using traceable telecommunications. Colombian forces believe that the FARC create diversionary strikes to protect Secretariat members when they travel from one region to another.

¶9. (S) The Joint Forces Decisive Action Unit (FUCAD) and the Rapid Deployment Force (FUDRA) were still co-located in the JTF-Omega area during this quarter in order to pursue Mono Jojoy. The operations tempo in this area reportedly remained high during this quarter. Colombian military forces in JTF-Omega continue to rely heavily on the United States for helicopter and fixed wing flight hour support for logistics resupply operations--as well as aviation, ground and riverine fuel supplies that directly support their tactical mobility and logistics requirements. The FUCAD may be relocated in the near future to another priority zone such as Narino or the Nudo de Paramillo region in Antioquia.

MID-LEVEL SUCCESSES

¶10. (C) Although no Secretariat members were netted this quarter, the Colombian military killed or captured a significant number of mid-level commanders over the past six months. Some analysts believe the FARC will not be able to sustain such mid-level losses without a significant operational impact. The following commanders were captured or killed this quarter:

-- On May 15, police captured Luis Alberto Tovar (alias "Leonardo") in Bogota. He was in charge of reactivating urban militias in the capital, and was also attempting to infiltrate universities and schools.

-- On May 24, the Colombian army captured 8 members of the FARC's 51st Front, including finance chief Telmo Pulido (alias "Ricardo Emisora") at a ranch in Sumapaz, Cundinamarca. Pulido had reportedly been assigned to carry out attacks and extortion in Bogota following the capture of "Negro Antonio" following his capture in February 2009.

-- On May 30, Colombian police captured Adela Perez (alias "Patricia"), a senior FARC leader who participated in the 1994 car bomb assassination of General Carlos Julio Gil Coronado in Villavicencio, Meta and a 2001 assassination attempt against current Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez.

-- On June 1, the commander of the FARC's Alonso Cortes Company, Jhon Edison Guzman (alias "Piernas"), was killed by the army in Rioblanco, Tolima. He had 19 years of experience with the FARC and was reportedly a member of FARC Secretariat Member Pablo Catatumbo's security ring.

-- On June 7, Colombian security forces killed Jorge Eliecer Fernandez (alias "Eladio"), commander of the Jacobo Arenas Urban Front in Argelia, Antioquia. Eladio was a 16-year FARC veteran responsible for recruitment and logistics in the Northwest Bloc and was blamed for many attacks near Medellin.

-- On June 11, the army captured alias "Martin Cuero" in Calarca, Quindio. He was the logistics head for the Eastern Bloc Central Front and a close collaborator of Mono Jojoy. He was reportedly working to establish a mobility corridor between Buenaventura, the coffee belt, Meta and Caqueta.

-- On June 13, a Colombian air force bombing raid injured FARC Eastern Bloc coordinator Henry Castellanos (alias "Edilson Romana").

-- On June 25, the army engaged the FARC's Manuel Cepeda Vargas Front in heavy fighting in Timba, Cauca. The Colombian military believed that 25 FARC members were killed. Front commander Juan Carlos Usuga (alias "El Enano") was believed to be wounded and possibly killed.

-- On June 29, a joint-forces unit in Buenaventura municipality in Cauca bombed a 50-rebel camp of the FARC's "Libardo Garcia" mobile column. FARC commander alias "El Costeno" was killed.

45th ANNIVERSARY UPTICK

¶11. (C) A FARC offensive during the month of May 2009 to commemorate 45 years since the FARC's foundation left more than 30 dead across Colombia, including military, civilians and FARC. Still, some analysts pointed to the FARC's inability to carry out a major attack as a sign of its debilitation. The Defense Ministry reported that total acts of terrorism for the first half of 2009 were down 10% to 178, compared with 197 in the same time frame in 2008. Attacks on oil pipelines were reportedly down by 45% and attacks on electrical towers were down by 57%. Other analysts observed an increase in smaller-level attacks during this quarter that may not be accounted for in the Colombian government's official figures.

¶12. (C) The FARC continued to use bombs, ambushes and land mines--between 60% to 70% of the casualties suffered by Colombian forces are the result of land mines. Manual eradication deaths from bombs and snipers have increased by nearly 25% over last year's rates. According to GOC reports, there was a 26% increase (from 205 in 2008 to 259 in 2009) in the number of Colombian personnel killed in combat in the first semester of 2009 compared with the same time frame in ¶2008. The Colombian Army also announced on May 19 that the FARC were dipping bullets in cyanide to kill soldiers. FARC attacks this quarter included:

-- On May 5, the FARC detonated a bomb in Valledupar, Cesar near a police stations, killing two and injuring ten civilians.

-- On May 8, the FARC killed two police officers in La Julia, Meta.

-- On May 10, the FARC ambushed a Colombian patrol in Narino, near the Ecuadorian border, killing seven army patrol members and wounding four others.

-- On May 20, the FARC bombed two electricity towers in Arauca, causing a blackout in three cities and oil facilities. Some 100,000 people were affected.

-- On May 29, the FARC ambushed a Colombian army battalion in La Guajira department, approximately two kilometers from the Venezuelan border, killing eight Colombian soldiers.

-- On June 1, the FARC's Teofilo Forero Castro Mobile Column in Garzon, Huila killed a soldier and abducted Conservative Party councilman Armando Acuna Molina.

-- On June 20, the FARC's 7th Front launched an attack with three gas-cylinder bombs on the convoy of the Mayor of San Jose del Guaviare, Pedro Arenas. The town's city council President, Marcos Baquero, was believed to have been abducted by the FARC in the attack. (Note: in an August interview with weekly "Cambio" magazine, Secretariat Member Alfonso Cano admitted the FARC was holding two city councilmen who he accused of "paramilitary links and corruption." End note.)

-- On June 29, the FARC's 21st Tulio Varon Front detonated a roadside bomb in an attempt to kill Tolima Governor Oscar Barreto in La Balastrera, Tolima.

UNIVERSITY RECRUITMENT

¶13. (C) Colombian authorities arrested several FARC operatives this quarter who were engaged in university recruiting. The information leading to these arrests was derived from the capture of electronic media by the Colombian army during operations in Sumapaz, Cundinamarca earlier in

the year. Most notable was the May 22 arrest of Miguel Angel Beltran Villegas's (alias "Jaime Cienfuegos"). Beltran was a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and at the National University of Colombia in Bogota. E-mails on Raul Reyes' laptops also linked him to the FARC. On May 4, two national university students were sentenced to four years in prison in Bogota for collaborating with the FARC. Yury Paola Ramirez Ballesteros, 23 and Andres Mauricio Reyes, 26, pled guilty to conducting intelligence and logistics work for the FARC's Antonio Narino Urban Front. FARC operative Natalia del Pilar Lara Alvarez (alias "Juliana"), a member of Antonio Narino Urban Front was arrested on April 15. She was a student of medicine at the National University in Bogota and was believed to be responsible for recruitment and indoctrination and to have participated in extortion bombings in Bogota.

RELATIONS AMONG FARC, ELN AND BACRIM

¶14. (C) The FARC, ELN and emerging criminal groups (BACRIM) continued to fight each other in some areas such as Arauca while cooperating in other areas such as Cauca and parts of Narino. Cauca Governor Guillermo Alberto Gonzalez said there is no doubt that the FARC and gangs of narcotraffickers are operating jointly in Buenos Aires municipality along the Pacific coast. Some analysts believe that if Secretariat Member Mono Jojoy is killed, then Pedro Guerrero's (alias "Cuchillo") organization in Colombia's eastern plains-which both fights and cooperates with different FARC fronts in the area--will begin move into FARC-controlled areas in Meta.

¶15. (C) On April 13, an ELN communique requested the FARC to halt confrontations to keep improving relations, following clashes between the ELN and FARC in Arauca, Cauca, Narino and eastern Antioquia. In a May 18 letter, ELN Central Command (COCE) member Nicolas Rodriguez Bautista (alias "Gabino") proposed cessation of hostilities to FARC leader alias Alfonso Cano.
Brownfield